



# 5497

**Domestic Violence Crisis Center**  
Serving the communities of  
Stamford, Norwalk, Westport,  
New Canaan, Darien, Wilton  
and Weston

Date: March 11, 2010

To: Senator McDonald, Senator Doyle, Representative Walker, Representative Lawlor and members of the Human Services and Judiciary Committees.

Re: Support for Enhancing Information Sharing Between Civil and Criminal Courts

Dear Sen. McDonald, Sen. Doyle, Rep. Walker, Rep. Lawlor and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of enhancing information sharing between civil and criminal courts.

Proposed legislation, if enacted, would encourage civil court judges to take notice of an alleged abuser's past or pending domestic violence criminal charges. While we agree that facilitating information sharing between civil and criminal courts is in the best interest of victims of domestic violence in the State of Connecticut, we would suggest that the legislature consider taking a more comprehensive approach and create integrated domestic violence courts.

An Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) Court model empowers a single judge with the authority to handle family, criminal and matrimonial matters, with criminal allegations of domestic violence forming the threshold requirement for entry into the IDV court. These three inter-related case types would constitute the crux of the IDV Court's jurisdiction. The IDV Court model provides an opportunity to address the myriad of inter-related family problems that may bring a family into the court system in a comprehensive manner while providing integrated service delivery and improving both court efficiency and informed judicial decision-making.

The domestic violence provider and local law enforcement agency in Stamford, Connecticut have already begun moving to facilitate the creation of a more coordinated community response to domestic violence. Over the last two years, DVCC has taken major steps towards becoming a comprehensive service center for victims of domestic violence in our area. Expanding the legal services offered to victims of domestic violence, initiating a medical advocacy project to tie in medical service providers, creating a housing advocacy project, and increasing the breadth of our community education department are only a few of the efforts DVCC has made. Our local law enforcement agency created a Special Victims Unit, a unit staffed with highly trained officers devoted to working domestic violence cases. The partnership that DVCC and the Stamford SVU have fostered has exponentially facilitated the community response to victims of domestic violence. In addition to engaging in a daily dialogue, advocates and officers go out into the community multiple times a week and conduct unannounced visits to homes identified as high risk for domestic violence with the goal of increasing victim safety and offender accountability.

Unfortunately, despite all of our successful efforts towards creating a holistic community response, which facilitates the struggles of the courageous victims of domestic violence in our service area, our clients often still find themselves at a loss within the court system. The current lack of coordination in the Connecticut court system forces victims to expend an inordinate amount of effort to ensure that their safety is ensured and that their abusers are held accountable. For example, uncoordinated civil and criminal court proceedings necessitate multiple court dates, which places an undue financial burden on victims of domestic violence, as a multitude of court appearances tends to negatively impact employment, and thus their crucial financial independence. Additionally, the cumbersome responsibility of ensuring that the civil and criminal courts are each aware of what is happening in the other system, an awareness that is crucial to prevent abusers from using the court system to further victimize their victims, more often than not falls on the shoulders of these abused individuals. We believe it is time to build on the coordinated service structures for victims of domestic violence already in place and begin to create complimentary coordinated courts to further facilitate victim safety and offender accountability.

Victim safety, offender accountability, as well as trained and educated personnel are the cornerstones of the IDV Court model that combine to facilitate the court's ability to handle family matters in a consistent and comprehensive manner; each IDV would form relationships with a variety of stakeholder agencies, organizations, and social service providers, including victim advocates and counselors; one court would monitor offenders in both criminal and family contexts, and offenders' compliance with court mandated programs would be immediately communicated to one judge hearing all matters; and intensive domestic violence training would be provided to the relevant judges and staff in order to keep all personnel abreast of the latest research and best practices in the field.

We believe this should be the approach the Connecticut Assembly should model its information sharing efforts on, as it is the model that provides the most comprehensive and coordinated community response to domestic violence, and we urge both committees to enact legislation that begins to move Connecticut towards this best practice system.

Thank you for your attention in this matter. Should either committee have any questions, we would be happy to discuss this further at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Pawlik, Co-Director of Court and Legal Services  
Andrea Dahms, Co-Director of Court and Legal Services